

## The Secret Behind The Secret

The #1 bestselling book in America is a 216-page volume called *The Secret*, based on a DVD of the same title. “Truly life-changing information,” exclaims the publisher on Amazon.com. “A new era for humankind,” exults the web site. “This is The Secret to everything — the secret to unlimited joy, health, money, relationships, love, youth: everything you have ever wanted. [...] [It] utterly transformed the lives of every person who ever knew it... Plato, Newton, Carnegie, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Einstein.”

What is this incredible secret? Namely, that the universe is governed by a heretofore unknown Law of Attraction, as yet undiscovered by conventional physicists, that the world rearranges itself to conform to your thoughts. Or, as one proponent put it, the universe “is akin to a big mail-order department,” in which you “‘order’ what you get by sending energetic messages out to the universe.”

This stuff is so blatantly absurd that it’s not really worth debunking. And it’s silly enough that [Barbara Ehrenreich has already written the definitive mockery](#) (“Thoughts exert a gravitational-type force on the world, so that ‘whenever you think something, the thought immediately attracts its physical equivalent.’ If you think money — in a totally urgent, focused and positive way, of course — it will come flying into your pockets.”). [Twice](#) (“I don’t have to write this blog, I can simply visualize it already written — or could, if I’d bothered to read the whole book and finish the DVD.”)

But, drawing on some of Ehrenreich’s other work, I’d like to discuss *why* of this book. The book’s success is easy enough to explain. As [the Canadian publisher put it](#) in an interview with the *Toronto Star*, “Basically, human beings are lazy. If you tell them you can get rich just by thinking about it, obviously, they’re going to buy it.”

But these books also have a more insidious effect. As Ehrenreich notes, by making your lack of wealth and a good job into personal problems, you discourage people from looking at the social systems that created and sustained those problems. By telling them their thoughts control the universe, you can persuade them to do things like — as one Secret-endorsing book encouraged — “Place your hand on your heart and say ... ‘I admire rich people!’ ‘I bless rich people!’ ‘I love rich people!’ ‘And I’m going to be one of those rich people too!’”

And, in reverse, by telling people that bad things are caused by their negative thoughts, you get to persuade them to stop thinking about bad things. “I’m a really big believer in The Secret,” a young black woman recently explained at a Secret-related book reading. “But I also believe that discrimination and racism are real. How can you harmonize those things?”

“You just said you believe in discrimination,” explained the guru. “You be-*live* it. I’m going to ask you to stop believing it, because if you focus on the negative, you project it yourself.”

That’s right — if you stop believing in the existence of discrimination, it’ll stop happening to you. No need to fight to end it! Those black people banned from lunch counters in the South? They weren’t simply believing hard enough. Those studies showing that resumes with black-sounding names on them received far fewer callbacks as identical ones with white-sounding names? The researchers didn’t take into account their thoughtwaves.

Following this idea goes to some pretty dark places and the authors take it all the way. “I really love what you’re doing,” said a young man at the same event. “But how, for example, was 9/11 attracted to the people in those buildings? That’s something I can’t understand.”

“Sometimes, we experience the law of attraction collectively,” explains the guru. “The US maybe had a fear of being attacked. Those 3,000 people — they might have put out some kind of fear that attracted this to happen, fear of dying young, fear that something might happen that day. But sometimes, it is collective.”

When you manage to convince people that even getting murdered is their own fault, you’ve truly found the secret of success. For the already powerful, that is.

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